

Ten Myths about Teaching Reading

Some of our most cherished beliefs about reading instruction are based on an error of fact—that all children should be taught to read in precisely the same way

BY MARIE CARBO

We all want our students to learn to read easily. We want the process to be sufficiently effortless so the students can concentrate on what they're reading, rather than the process; and we want reading to be interesting so that children will choose to read, will read widely, and will learn to appreciate the best literature. To accomplish these worthy goals, we need to provide our students with warm, happy memories which they'll associate with learning to read.

However, there are certain reading myths which, when put into practice, make it difficult for educators to attain these goals. In a sense, these myths are all variations on one basic myth: that all children require the same

of three possible groups: (a) those who really need phonics to become good readers; (b) those who are capable of learning phonics, but who do not need it to become good readers; and (c) children who are unable to master phonics.

The first group, those who need phonics, have strong auditory/analytic reading styles. They have the auditory abilities needed to do well with phonics; they can discriminate among sounds, quickly blend letters to form words and learn best through analytic lessons (when information is presented in discrete units, step-by-step and sequentially, with many rules, the way phonics is usually taught).

The second group of students have the ability to learn phonics, but do not need phonic instruction to become good readers. These youngsters are sufficiently auditory and analytic to learn and apply phonic rules, but their excellent visual/global abilities enable them to develop a sight vocabulary rapidly, and to intuitively develop an awareness of word patterns. It is that strong intuitive ability that makes phonics unnecessary. Such children learn to read best with holistic techniques (whole word, language experience, etc.). For this group, small amounts of phonics may be useful for spelling, but large amounts are a waste of precious time at best, and a reading "turn off" at worst.

Group three, students unable to master phonics, are youngsters who are not strongly auditory and analytic. They may have difficulty discriminating among sounds, recalling the sounds letters make, and/or quickly blending letter sounds to form words. Often phonic rules do not make sense to them and

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they find the learning of phonics both difficult and/or boring. Group three needs alternatives to phonics, which can be determined by identifying each student's reading style strengths.

Reading Myth #2

A youngster who has not mastered phonics cannot become a good reader.

Many millions of adults are living proof of the fallacy of that statement. There are good readers who have never mastered phonics. Moreover, there are many functional illiterates who have had phonics instruction. Whether students do not need phonics to become good readers, or are unable to master phonics, they will learn to read better and faster with reading methods that match their individual reading styles.

Today, we know that children have different reading styles. There are at least a dozen reading methods, or ways to teach reading, including phonics, whole-word, language experience, recorded books, Orton-Gillingham, Fernald, choral reading and so on. No single method, including phonics, is better than another. The reading method which most closely matches a student's reading style is the one that should be selected for that youngster.

Reading Myth #3

There is a definite set of reading skills that should be taught to every child.

Clearly, if visual/global youngsters can learn to read fluently and with good comprehension with holistic reading approaches, then there cannot be a “set of reading skills” that every child needs to become a good reader. A belief in Myth #3 has given rise to the detailed scope and sequence charts that are a part of most basal reader programs. The truth is that for the youngsters who do need skill work to become good readers, the particular skills identified by a reading series may or may not be necessary for certain children. *Lack of mastery of a skill does not indicate need.* A skill is needed only if it helps a youngster to move toward the goals described at the beginning of this article, and only if the learning process is enjoyable.

Reading Myth #4

Youngsters should not proceed to “higher” level skills until they have mastered lower level skills.

This would not be a myth if all youngsters

learned to read in a predictable, step-by-step fashion. But they don't. For strongly analytic students, a hierarchy of reading skills, taught in a specific sequence, may be appropriate. Young children, however, tend to be strongly global, not analytic. Global learners very often are capable of high-level critical thinking, even though they cannot demonstrate mastery of skills considered to be at a “lower-level.”

Reading Myth #5

Reading achievement tests measure accurately a youngster's ability to read.

No reading achievement test which is used for student placement should measure decoding abilities. Phonics is *not* a reading goal to be accomplished by every student. It is, instead, one of many possible methods that can be used to help youngsters read well. Reading tests should measure the degree to which a reading program is helping students to move closer to the reading goals stated at the beginning of this article.

Some of today's reading achievement tests penalize global students. To provide an unbiased appraisal of students' reading abilities, reading achievement tests should: (a) measure reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary; and (b) contain attractive visuals and high-interest stories. Pictures help both global and visual youngsters to understand written concepts. If a story is dull, it's very likely that global youngsters, *in particular* will become bored and find it hard to concentrate on, and difficult to recall any factual information embedded in the story.

Reading Myth #6

District-wide adoption of one basal reader series assures a smooth progression of skills development from one grade level to the next.

A number of assumptions are present in this myth. The first is that a definite set of reading skills exists and is needed before a student can become a good reader (see Myth #3); the second is that basal reader publishers have been successful in defining those skills and providing practice in the form of teaching lessons and workbook pages. In addition, the discussion of Myths #1 and #2, states that phonics is unnecessary for certain youngsters, while for others, mastery of phonic skills is impossible, even for youngsters who can read fluently.

Many basal reader series should be available so that teachers can select those

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that are best for their particular students. Stories should be of great interest to the youngsters, and the skill exercises should be needed and enjoyable.

Reading Myth #7

Students should read all the stories in the basal reader and complete all the workbook pages.

All students should enjoy reading and want to read on their own. A great deal of research indicates that most children want to select what they read, at least some of the time. If a story in a basal reader is one that your students dislike or find dull, skip it. That will give you more time to read to your students, or allow them a reading period when they can select books to read.

If you scrutinize the pages in your workbook, you’ll undoubtedly find some pages that are unnecessary for any students, some pages that are appropriate for certain students, and some pages that you should assign to all youngsters. The time you save can be spent on pleasurable reading activities.

Reading Myth #8

A remedial reading program should reinforce the reading techniques being used in the classrooms.

Any reading program should match or accommodate students’ reading styles and interests. Suppose, for example, a second grade reading program emphasized the whole-word approach. Jenny, a second grader in that reading program, is not a visual learner and has not done well. She needs a reading program that makes the most of her reading style strengths. If she is auditory and analytic, then phonics should be used; if she is global and tactual, the Fernald word-tracing method would be appropriate. Steven, on the other hand is a visual learner. He has been out of school with a prolonged illness. In his case, reinforcement of the classroom program would be helpful because the classroom program *does* match his reading style.

Reading Myth #9

The best way to help a student who is reading below grade level is through pullout reading programs.

The best way to help most students is in the regular classroom. Recent research indicates that high-achieving reading students are those whose reading styles are matched

by chance within a reading program. Every attempt should be made within the regular classroom to *deliberately* match a youngster’s reading style *before* failure occurs. If a child still has a reading problem, then additional help should be provided.

Reading Myth #10

Poor readers need phonics, plenty of structure and early-morning reading classes.

Poor readers do need phonics *if* that method matches their reading style. Youngsters pay attention when they learn through their reading style strengths. Many of today’s poor readers are youngsters who are being mismatched and who cannot function well in reading programs requiring highly analytic/auditory abilities. Many of them are tactual, kinesthetic, global learners who need hands-on materials and holistic teaching approaches.

As a group, poor readers tend to be most alert during the late morning or early afternoon. Usually, they are not early morning learners. If feasible, reading classes should be scheduled to match students’ time preferences when students are most receptive.

The best way to help youngsters to enjoy reading, read with good comprehension and fluency, read critically, and choose to read, is to make learning to read as easy, and enjoyable as possible for each student. The reading myths described above are myths because they contain the *same* pervasive, underlying belief that all children require *identical* reading methods, materials and skill work to become good readers. Research conducted during the past decade, indicates very strongly, however, that quite the opposite is true. Students learn to read most easily and with the greatest enthusiasm, when the required skill work is needed, and when the reading methods and materials match their reading style strengths and their interests.

When today’s educators recall their best childhood reading memories, seldom are school experiences even mentioned. By riding our thinking and our instructional practices of reading myths, more teaching time will be available for the positive, wondrous experiences in reading that fill children with excitement and help to make them lifelong readers. ↓